

Immigration Citizenship, Voter Registration Drives Set

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Chicago Tribune

June 26, 2006

Elected officials, union leaders and immigrant advocates today urged legal immigrants to become politically active by becoming U.S. citizens and registering to vote in a drive that will kick off Saturday.

Organizers spelled out plans to dispatch volunteers throughout Chicago neighborhoods and across the suburbs to bring naturalized citizens to the polls and solicit support for a plan to legalize the nation's 11 million to 12 million undocumented immigrants.

Members of the campaign, speaking at the Polish Museum of America on the city's Northwest Side, said they hope to capitalize on the momentum of marches that brought hundreds of thousands of immigrants and their supporters into the streets of Chicago earlier this year.

"We immigrants made history in the mobilizations of March 10 and May 1. Likewise, we are making a call to be a part of this," said Hector Rico, executive director of Latino Organization of the Southwest. "We are looking at (Saturday) to be another historic day."

On Saturday, volunteers plan to help more than 1,000 legal permanent residents fill out citizenship applications at Little Village High School, 3120 S. Kostner Ave.

The program is part of the New Americans Initiative, a naturalization program created by the Blagojevich administration.

Speakers repeatedly praised the governor's support, while U.S. Rep. Luis Guterrez (D-Ill.) discounted criticism that politics was driving the program. Mexican immigrants make up the largest immigrant group in the Chicago area and traditionally support Democrats.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) said the naturalization efforts are consistent with the best of America. "What would be more 'apple pie' than helping people become citizens of the United States of America?" she asked.

Schakowsky advised immigrants not to delay in becoming U.S. citizens because fees are likely to increase and the federal government is weighing changes that could make the naturalization exam more difficult.

In addition to the New Americans Initiative, organizers said they planned to launch Immigrant Democracy Summer, with volunteers canvassing door-to-door in immigrant enclaves to register voters. They intend to then track newly registered voters and mobilize them to vote in November.